

VZCZCXRO6385  
PP RUEHBC RUEHDA RUEHDE RUEHIHL RUEHKUK  
DE RUEHGB #0778/01 0810832  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
P 220832Z MAR 09  
FM AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2324  
INFO RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 BAGHDAD 000778

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PHUM](#) [SOCI](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [IZ](#)

SUBJECT: RRT Erbil: Nawshirwan Mustafa on Free Press, Elections

(U) This is an Erbil Regional Reconstruction Team cable.

(U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for Internet distribution.

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Summary  
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¶1. (SBU) During a March 17 visit to Sulaimaniyah, legendary Peshmerga commander and Talabani political rival Nawshirwan Mustafa gave RRT officers an impromptu tour of his Kurdistan News Network (KNN), the Region's first private TV station. KNN is finishing its test broadcast phase and will soon go to 24-hour, seven-day-a-week programming; according to Nawshirwan, initial ratings have been "incredible," with KNN quickly becoming the Region's most-watched TV channel. KDP and PUK officials, startled by KNN's popularity, have banned party members from appearing on the station, Nawshirwan claimed. He blasted the decision of a court in Sulaimaniyah to fine the Region's flagship independent newspaper, Hawlati, 13 million dinars (approx \$11,220) for having slandered Jalal Talabani. Nawshirwan said Talabani and his allies are using the party-controlled courts to financially strangle independent media. KNN has been warned by a senior KRG official to expect similar treatment, Nawshirwan said. On politics, Nawshirwan confirmed he will field an independent list in the upcoming KNA elections, which he predicted would take place in July.

He pledged that his list would function as a true opposition and would press the KRG to make its budget public. Nawshirwan called for many independent observers to come to the Kurdistan Region to monitor the elections. He asserted that Talabani was shocked by the provincial-elections drubbing that Abdul Aziz al-Hakim and ISCI received in the south and, fearing a similar voter backlash, is "tempted" to rig the KNA elections in Sulaimaniyah. End summary.  
End summary.

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Nawshirwan Mustafa Makes an Appearance...  
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¶2. (U) During a March 17 trip to Sulaimaniyah, RRT PD officers visited the new studios of the Kurdistan Region's first private TV station, the Kurdistan News Network (KNN), and met with its director, former Radio Nawa Chief Kurda Hassan. The PDOs were unexpectedly joined by Nawshirwan Mustafa, the owner of Wisha Media Group (KNN's parent company). Nawshirwan is a veteran PUK Peshmerga commander and former PUK Deputy Secretary General who is mounting a major challenge to Jalal Talabani's leadership of the party and the KDP/PUK virtual lock on politics in the Region. Clad in his trademark traditional Kurdish clothing, the wiry 65-year-old Nawshirwan gave PDOs his unvarnished views on a range of issues.

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...Says He's Proud of KNN's Independence...  
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¶3. (U) As we toured KNN's state-of-the-art studios, newsroom and editing bays, Nawshirwan emphasized that the station is genuinely independent. He underscored that he "doesn't care" about the

political affiliation of the station's staff, which includes KDP, PUK, and KIU members as well as those with no political affiliation. "What I care about is their professionalism," he said. Nawshirwan added that KNN is "a serious news channel" that will not air "singing and dancing," a reference to lengthy traditional Kurdish music and dance programs that are staples of party-owned stations such as Kurdistan TV and KurdSat.

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...Claims KNN is New Number One...  
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14. (SBU) According to Director Kurda, KNN is finishing its test broadcast phase and is preparing to go 24/7. The test phase has featured eight hours of programming, from 8 p.m. to 4 a.m., available to the public on the easily accessible NileSat 1 and Qavailable to the public on the easily accessible NileSat 1 and Hotbird satellites. In a move intended to make KNN a true Region-wide station, Kurda explained that viewers can change the KNN audio channel to Sorani (Erbil/Suly) or Kurmanji (Duhok) Kurdish dialects. Since beginning its testing, Nawshirwan claimed, KNN has become the most-watched TV station in the Kurdistan Region, in addition to drawing significant viewership among the Kurdish Diaspora in Europe. KNN's popularity, he added, has been noticed by the KDP and PUK, which he claimed had issued a joint internal instruction forbidding party officials from appearing on KNN. Offenders have been threatened with salary cuts, Nawshirwan added.

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...and Blasts the Fine Levied Against Hawlati Newspaper  
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15. (SBU) Regarding continued KRG pressure on the independent media,  
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Nawshirwan said he was "outraged" by the Sulaimaniyah Misdemeanor Court's recent decision to fine the Region's flagship independent newspaper, Hawlati, 13 million dinars for re-printing an article by an American think-tank writer who depicted Jalal Talabani as extremely corrupt. Talabani and his allies are simply trying to use the party-controlled courts to "financially strangle" Hawlati, Nawshirwan said. He added that a senior KRG official recently warned him that KNN would be pressured the same way. According to Nawshirwan and Director Kurda, the official joked that "it will be free speech for you, and more money for us."

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KNA Elections: Independents' Day?  
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16. (SBU) Turning to politics, Nawshirwan asserted he would field an independent list in the upcoming KNA elections. Repeating what he has said publicly, Nawshirwan stressed there would be no reconciliation with Talabani and the PUK Politburo. Nawshirwan said he is vetting candidates for his list, many of whom are prominent engineers, doctors, lawyers and teachers. All of his candidates, he added, will post their CVs on a web site so that "everybody knows" who they are and what they stand for. Nawshirwan added that he is building a campaign network throughout the Region and preparing campaign posters. Asked for his opinion of when the KNA elections would be held, Nawshirwan said President Barzani would likely postpone them for two months -- the legal limit. Beyond that, Nawshirwan said, Barzani's legitimacy as a leader could be publicly questioned by Baghdad and Washington.

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"We're Going to Win in Suly"...  
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17. (SBU) Nawshirwan said that, according to his own polls, his list will score big in Sulaimaniyah, taking as many as 20 of the KNA's 111 seats. His candidates, he explained, will campaign hard on providing basic public services. "Why is it," he asked rhetorically, that "18 years after the Kurdish Uprising, most people in Sulaimaniyah don't have access to clean drinking water, and have poor housing and poor healthcare?" Noting that he had recently

returned from visiting villages in the northern part of the province, Nawshirwan said some dilapidated schools had so many students that they were reduced to holding classes in rotating shifts. "Tell me the PUK doesn't have the money to build every village in Sulaimaniyah a large new school," he scoffed. Nawshirwan added that his bloc in the new KNA would function as a real opposition and would demand transparency in the KRG budget process. "If the KRG won't publicly release the budget, we'll sue it" in Iraqi Federal Court, he said.

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...If the Elections Are Free and Fair  
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18. (SBU) The key issue, Nawshirwan said, is whether the KNA elections will be as free and fair as the national provincial council elections in January. The KDP and PUK, he claimed, were both stunned by the electoral drubbing that voters in the south gave to Abdul Aziz al-Hakim and ISCI. Fearing a similar voter backlash, Nawshirwan claimed that Jalal Talabani is "very tempted" to rig the KNA elections in Suly. The antidote for that, he said, is to have many independent observers, including foreign diplomats, come to the Kurdistan Region for the elections. In closing, Nawshirwan warned that the PUK and KDP would turn up the rhetorical heat in the coming weeks and would attempt to depict him and his list as "extremists." "Don't believe a word of it," he said, stating that his list would work for a negotiated settlement of the disputed territories issue "instead of using threats of conflict, like Barzani." With a smile, Q"instead of using threats of conflict, like Barzani." With a smile, Nawshirwan added that "Talabani, Barham (Salih), and Kosrat (Rasoul) are panicking. They know that if I win, they're going to lose their posts."

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Comment  
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19. (SBU) We have no way of systematically assessing or verifying Nawshirwan's claims about KNN's high ratings during its test period. Anecdotally, however, there is evidence to suggest that KNN is popular. Local media and NGO contacts, as well as Sulaimaniyah-based RRT staff, tell us that KNN is now appearing at the top of satellite TV remote control drop-down menus in bars, shops and homes throughout the city. We share Nawshirwan's concern about the huge fine levied against the Hawlati newspaper. While no paragon of journalistic excellence and quite capable of printing outright falsehoods to pump up sales, Hawlati is nonetheless a serious independent paper that frequently reports accurately on sensitive subjects, including official corruption, which the KDP in particular would prefer to keep out of the spotlight.

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